THE SECRET SHAME

How America's Most Progressive Cities Betray Their Commitment to Educational Opportunity for All

brightbeam™

January 2020

For many years my home state of Minnesota has faced a bewildering conundrum. We are a state that enjoys a laudable standard of living, abundant natural resources, a strong economy, Fortune 500 companies that take corporate responsibility seriously, a clean civic system, and a host of public services that make being a Minnesotan a source of pride. At the same time, we constantly face a persistent challenge to our status as a progressive exemplar: Our public schools, unlike our other systems, do not work equally well for everyone. Educational outcomes for students of color and American Indians are among the worst in the nation. It is a strong departure from how we think of ourselves, and one we haven't confronted adequately.

My work for brightbeam has brought me to a wide variety of cities where I've been fortunate in meeting families, students and educators from all walks of life. During my visits I have noticed that Minnesota is far from an outlier. In fact, I recognize an obvious pattern that any traveler should be able to see. From Seattle to Minneapolis, and Oakland to D.C., there are construction cranes everywhere, condominiums going up, immense wealth growing, but in the shadows of prosperity there are children who will never truly experience the first-world lifestyles of the cities they live in. Further, like Minnesota, these cities are undoubtedly politically, socially, and economically progressive.

How is it that these would be places of such great inequity?

This report on the outcomes for children of color in America's most progressive cities is an attempt to highlight a problem we at brightbeam see as fixable. Wealthy and progressive cities have so much potential for truly tackling the immoral and unacceptable problem of racial and economic gaps in educational outcomes. To get there we first need communities and their political leaders to acknowledge that they have a problem, and from there we need the political class of all these cities to commit themselves to a meaningful plan that is co-created with the communities they serve and monitored year over year for progress toward the goal of closing gaps.

As an organization, we are on a mission to demand a better education and a brighter future for every child. As you read this report, keep in mind that, for us at brightbeam, this is a first look at the problem in progressive cities. We are dedicating ourselves to a long-term campaign that challenges and encourages progressives to apply their values of equity and social responsibility to the unconscionable gaps in educational opportunity. We welcome your participation, your pushback, and your partnership in turning our unequal urban centers into cities of hope where all children have the best opportunity to learn.

Thank you for reading.

Peace be with you,
Chris Stewart, CEO

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Martin Luther King, Jr., once famously chided America for giving minorities a bad check which has come back marked “insufficient funds.” Still, he said, “we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we’ve come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.”

Nowhere is this statement of reckoning more true than in our nation’s public schools, where students are nearly as segregated and unequally resourced as they were in the days when King led our nation to face the cruel inconsistencies between our rhetoric and our actions.

Public education is central to American democracy. Ideally, children from every area of our country can graduate from effective and well-resourced schools that prepare them equally for active citizenship and meaningful lives. Yet, the conditions in our schools are not ideal. Schools across the U.S. tend to struggle with educating black and Latino students when compared to their white peers. This is the case even in cities where there is notable progress on other important issues like immigration, health care and neighborhood revitalization. In fact, as we show in this report, highly prosperous cities with progressive residents have particularly poor outcomes for children living at the margins. It is ironic that this is happening for children living

in cities that are best positioned to reverse the nation's shameful education "achievement gap."

Leaders of progressive cities often frame their policy proposals in terms of what's best for those with the least opportunity and the greatest obstacles — those who have been "**left out and left behind**," as the Democratic party states. But, in education, we found the opposite: Students in America's most progressive cities face greater racial inequity in achievement and graduation rates than students living in the nation's most conservative cities.

Progressive Cities Have Larger Achievement Gaps Than Conservative Cities

- Progressive cities, on average, have achievement gaps in math and reading that are 15 and 13 percentage points higher than in conservative cities, respectively.

- In San Francisco, for example, 70% of white students are proficient in math, compared to only 12% of black students reaching proficiency — a 58-point gap.

- In Washington, D.C., 83% of white students scored proficient in reading compared to 23 percent of black students — a 60-point gap.

- In contrast, three of the 12 most conservative cities — Virginia Beach, Anaheim and Fort Worth — have effectively closed or even erased the gap in at least one of the academic categories we examined.

We Tried to Explain It Away, But We Couldn't

There are many factors that contribute to student success, and while we could not control for all of them we did our best to consider the best explanations larger racialized gaps in progressive cities. For instance, progressive cities like New York and Chicago are much larger than any of the conservative cities we studied. We thought controlling for population size in our data might reveal that as a predictor for larger gaps. But it didn't.

We also looked at other factors that might create strong correlations between larger achievement gaps and progressive cities: the percentage of white students in the city, the per-pupil spending, the level of income inequality, and the poverty rate. But controlling for these factors did not erase the correlation between a city's progressivism and the sizable racialized gaps in educational outcomes.

It is important to point out, though, that while this report shines a bright light on a striking correlation, it makes no claim as to causation. We do not make a claim as to why progressive cities appear to have significantly larger gaps in student achievement. We recognize there is a great deal of variability in local policies and practices that certainly impact results, so we limit the scope of this report to the facts we observe and we invite those who care to take action.

Our Approach

To determine a rationale for what is a progressive city and what is a conservative city we relied on criteria developed independently by political scientists **Chris Tausanovitch and Christopher Warshaw**, who pooled data from seven large surveys of U.S. public opinion to rank the nation's biggest cities in terms of conservatism. We then selected the 12 most conservative cities and the 12 least conservative cities from that list to establish the conservative and progressive cities that make up the base of this report.

With those cities in mind, we pulled the publicly available school achievement and graduation data from public school districts in each of those cities. When we analyzed the achievement gaps between black and white students and the gaps between Latino and white students we found larger gaps than readers might expect from cities where progressive residents presumably hold the most political, administrative and cultural power.

Recommendations

We are careful not to make leaps from sharing our findings to making policy prescriptions. Our report is more concerned with outcomes as an end point for observation rather than specific school policies or practices that produce the outcomes. While this research does not support any specific policy recommendations, we do hope it will spark action from political leaders and community organizers to produce community-monitored plans for how they will take decisive action to create a system of educational opportunities that move children from the margins to the economic center of their cities.

For leaders with stewardship over children this means:

1. Convening city stakeholders to develop a common understanding of the issues preventing school success.
2. Making plans that marshal all possible resources to support children in school.
3. Creating understandable methods for sharing public information regarding school outcomes.

For parents, advocates and others, this means:

1. Spreading the word about the problem and potential solutions.
2. Demanding a plan from city leaders and then holding them accountable for making progress.
3. Developing a collective voice pushing for better schools.

Why This Matters

Though many dedicated educators and community members commit themselves every day to improving education, our most progressive cities have made very little progress towards the fundamental responsibility of helping every student reach their highest potential.

In the face of these data, progressive leaders cannot make excuses for failing to close these gaps. Our research shows that there are U.S. cities where little to no gaps exist. Those cities happen to be conservative. This leads us to expect more of progressive leaders, and our children deserve better.

School and municipal leaders in all cities, regardless of political affiliation, now have an opportunity to acknowledge these gaps and take action to change this reality.

AN EXAMPLE

San Francisco is arguably among the most politically progressive cities in the United States. Its mayor, London Breed, is an embodiment of the progressive dream: She became the mayor of a major American city despite the racism she undoubtedly encountered as a black woman and despite the poverty she faced growing up in San Francisco's Western Addition neighborhood, where she lived in public housing, relied on "government groceries," and drank water from old mayonnaise jars instead of cups. Through her own hard work, and with the help of social safety nets, she graduated from high school with honors before getting a bachelor's degree from the University of California, Davis, and a master's degree 15 years after that.

In August 2019, she announced $10 million in stipends for public school educators working in the city's "high-potential schools."

> **"Students in San Francisco deserve a high-quality education, regardless of where they live or go to school," she said in a press release.**

Breed is the latest in a long, unbroken succession of Democratic mayors in San Francisco. The last Republican elected there took office in 1964. The state of California has been under Democratic administrations since Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger left office in 2010.

Democrats and progressives have long prided themselves on uplifting the underprivileged and often present their policy proposals and their criticisms in terms of *equity* or their effect on the "least among us." Robert Reich, one of the most prominent progressive voices of our time, described progressive virtues by saying "progressives believe in openness, equal opportunity, and tolerance. Progressives assume we're all in it together: We all benefit from public investments in schools and health care and infrastructure." The problem with this analysis is that "we all" don't benefit equally from investments in schools. Society fails to give students in poverty, and students of color, an equal opportunity to learn.

The word "equity" is ubiquitous in education, but there is little consensus on its meaning. We assume it means giving the most help to those with the greatest need (or facing the biggest obstacles), leveling the playing field, and providing opportunities for everyone to thrive, regardless of race, gender, income or social status are at the heart of progressive platforms, rhetoric, policy-making and individual lifestyles. Historically, progressives have taken leading roles in advancing these values through policy, including the Civil Rights Act, the War on Poverty, marriage equality, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and many other social programs intended to support disadvantaged groups.

So how do we explain outstandingly poor educational results for minority children in San Francisco — which also happens to be **one of the wealthiest cities** in the country? After all, progressives hold the power in city and state government to implement policies derived from their values, set tax rates, allocate funding and reinforce systemic structures that make their stated values manifest. Shouldn't an incredibly wealthy place like San Francisco be the most likely to have used their considerable resources, political will, and community support for helping black and Latino children succeed in school? Shouldn't this be where we see the smallest educational disparities between white students and their black and brown peers?

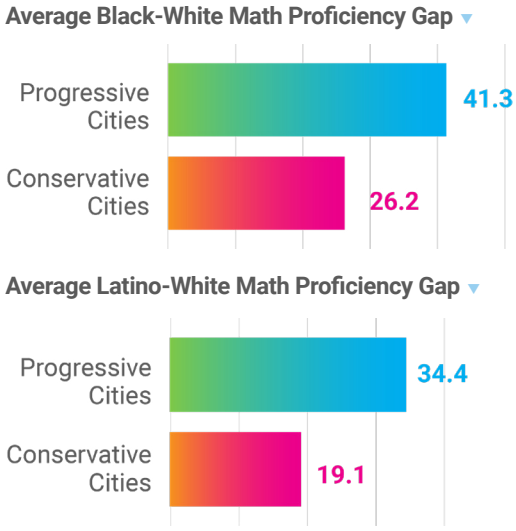
It should be, but it's not.

Hidden in the shadows of our most progressive cities are millions of children who will never experience the best of what those cities have to offer due to the pervasive inequities that decision-makers have presided over for decades.

PROGRESSIVE CITIES HAVE LARGER ACHIEVEMENT GAPS THAN CONSERVATIVE ONES

Despite its political leanings, San Francisco, like 10 of the other most progressive cities in the country, tends to have greater — not smaller — gaps in academic achievement between white students and their black and Latino peers, when compared to the most conservative cities in the country.

When we look at the data for public schools in the 12 most progressive and the 12 most conservative cities, we find that while all students have roughly the same proficiency rates (i.e., students in progressive cities perform slightly better, on average, than students in conservative cities on reading and slightly worse in math), the black-white and Latino-white gaps in math proficiency were, on average, 15 percentage points greater in progressive cities. We saw similar patterns for reading and graduation rates. In every case except Detroit,[1] progressive cities have strikingly large achievement gaps.



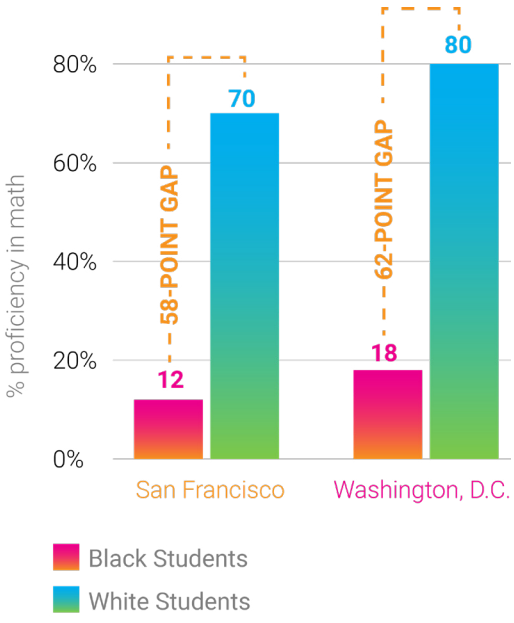
1 Since 1950, Detroit has lost more than 60% of its population and since 2011, 15% of students living in Detroit attend school in a district outside of the city. They also have substantially lower performance rates. These factors make Detroit an outlier for the purposes of this study. See more details on page 19.

Six of the 12 progressive cities — San Francisco, Washington, Seattle, Oakland, Minneapolis and Portland — have yawning black-white achievement gaps in both math and reading that exceed 40 percentage points. In politically progressive Minneapolis, the Latino-white high school graduation rate gap is an astounding 30 percentage points.

To put these gaps into perspective, consider San Francisco, where 70% of white students are proficient in math (based on the state's and district's own standards), yet only 12% of black students are hitting that proficiency mark in math. That's a 58-point gap.

In Washington, D.C., 80% of white students are scoring proficient in math as opposed to only 18% of black students, a 62-point gap. On average, progressive cities have a 41-point black-white gap in math and a 40-point gap in reading. The gap between Latino and white students is smaller than the black-white gap, but still larger when compared to conservative cities.

Average Black-White Math Proficiency Gaps in Washington D.C. and San Francisco



A SNAPSHOT OF OUR APPROACH:

1. **Identified Progressive vs Conservative Cities.**

   We identified the 12 most progressive and 12 most conservative cities using an established study by Chris Tausanovitch and Christopher Warshaw ranking American cities. Plus, if you live in one of them, you're probably nodding in agreement.

2. **Analyzed Achievement Gaps From Publicly Available Data**

   We pulled available public achievement and graduation rate data from public school districts in these cities and looked at gaps — rather than rates — to account for potential bias.

3. **We Identified Correlation, Not Causation**

   We found clear evidence of larger achievement gaps in progressive cities compared to conservative ones. However, given the data we used for this study, we cannot identify what causes these gaps.

4. **We Ruled Out Some Possible Explanations**

   We considered the size of the city, the percentage of white students, and economic factors. Controlling for these factors made no meaningful difference in the results.

In contrast, three of the 12 conservative cities — Virginia Beach, Anaheim, and Fort Worth — have effectively closed the gap in at least one of the academic categories we looked at, literally achieving a gap of zero or one. The politically conservative Oklahoma City has even turned the tables on our typical thinking about race-based gaps. There, students of color outperform white students on high school graduation rates.

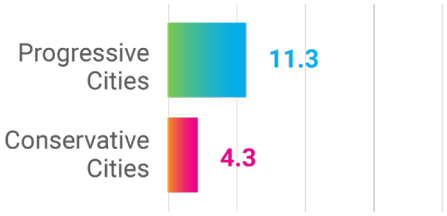
On average, conservative cities own a 26-point gap in black-white math scores, and a 27-point gap for reading — still nowhere near ideal outcomes, but roughly 15 points and 13 points lower, respectively, than what we see in progressive cities.

Average Black-White Reading Proficiency Gap

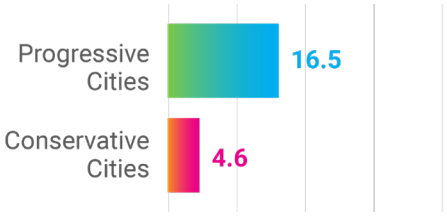
Average Latino-White Reading Proficiency Gap

Unacceptable racial achievement gaps in our public education system are prevalent just about everywhere, from the most conservative cities to the least and everything in between. Just because one city's achievement gaps are smaller doesn't mean leaders there shouldn't consistently aspire for better outcomes. But the fact that progressive cities have such substantially larger academic achievement gaps stands in sharp contrast to their declared values.

Average Black-White Graduation Rate Gap



Average Latino-White Graduation Rate Gap



The embarrassingly inequitable outcomes in progressive cities should ignite the residents of those cities to demand education systems that work equally well for every child, not just because their values demand it, or because the success of the city depends on it, but because addressing it is critical for the children in their cities.

OF ALL THE FACTORS WE LOOKED AT, PROGRESSIVISM IS THE GREATEST PREDICTOR

We attempted to understand the results by looking at other factors that could create strong correlations between larger achievement gaps and progressive cities. Each of the **bold** questions represents a condition that we thought could likely explain the discrepancy between progressive and conservative cities.

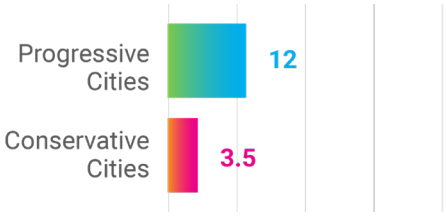
Would we find similar results if we just compared big cities, where there are higher student populations, to smaller cities?

No. In this case, size doesn't matter. We ran a regression analysis to control for districts with larger student populations and the effect was statistically insignificant (see pages 26-27) — it didn't make a difference in the results.

Could the gaps be bigger in progressive cities because they have fewer white people compared to conservative cities (given that fewer white people typically means fewer resources to address the gaps)?

First, that's not always true: **Duval County Schools** in Jacksonville (one of the 12 most conservative cities) has higher percentages of black and Latino students than **Seattle Public Schools** (one of the 12 most progressive cities). Second, even where there are higher percentages of white students, it doesn't have a statistically significant effect on math and reading gaps (see Table 3 on page 27). The only effect we observed was a slightly larger graduation rate gap between black and white students in cities where there were more white students. Still, it wasn't enough to bring progressive and conservative cities much closer together.

Regression-Adjusted Black-White Graduation Rate Gaps



What about per-pupil spending?

We know from research that money matters in education. Yet, spending is actually much higher in most progressive cities with large gaps than in conservative cities with small or negligible gaps, so that doesn't explain it either.

Wouldn't conservative cities have higher rates of students leaving the public school system for private options? That would likely "lower the ceiling" and leave the lower-income, less-advantaged students all together, thus shrinking the gaps, right?

Actually, families in progressive cities are about as likely as those in conservative cities to choose a private school. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics, 14.4% of students, on average, attend private schools in the 12 progressive cities we looked at compared to 11.6% of students in the conservative cities.

A study from 2014 found that where you've got greater income inequality, you have greater academic achievement gaps. Perhaps progressive cities have a harder problem to solve because they have higher rates of income inequality. If conservative cities had the same kind of wealth disparities that progressive cities have, wouldn't they likely have bigger achievement gaps too?

The evidence suggests income inequality is roughly the same between the conservative and progressive cities we studied. Based on the Gini Index for Income Inequality from the most recently available census data (where 0 is total equality and 1 is total inequality), income inequality, on average, in these progressive and conservative cities is .4681 and .4607 respectively. In fact, six of the 12 progressive cities have lower-income inequality than the conservative cities average and five of the 12 conservative cities have greater income inequality than the progressive cities average. Income inequality doesn't explain why progressive cities have significantly higher achievement gaps.

Perhaps students in progressive cities are likely to have higher poverty rates among students of color (as measured by more students with free or reduced-price lunch status). If that's true, wouldn't a higher percentage of students of color in poverty translate to more of them failing to meet the proficiency standards? For example, if 90% of my city's black students are poor, we'd expect to see fewer reaching proficiency than if 30% were, right?

In cities with higher percentages of middle- to upper-income black families, you might expect to see narrower gaps between white and black students. But because of a lack of data, in most cases, we don't actually know if there is a greater percentage of middle- to upper-income black families in conservative cities. Where we did have race and income data for students, though, we found that the gaps between lower-income black and white students were often about the same as the gaps between upper-income black and white students.

We were able to collect school level income data in five of the 24 cities: three progressive cities (San Francisco, the District of Columbia and Oakland) and two conservative cities (Anaheim and Virginia Beach). For these five,

we disaggregated results by both race and income. The race gaps in these five cities within income categories were very similar to their race gaps overall. The same was true for lower- and higher-income white students compared to Latinos within those same income categories.

In the case of math proficiency, however, in San Francisco, Washington, D.C. and Oakland, the gaps between middle- to upper-income black and white students is actually larger than it is between lower-income white and black students.

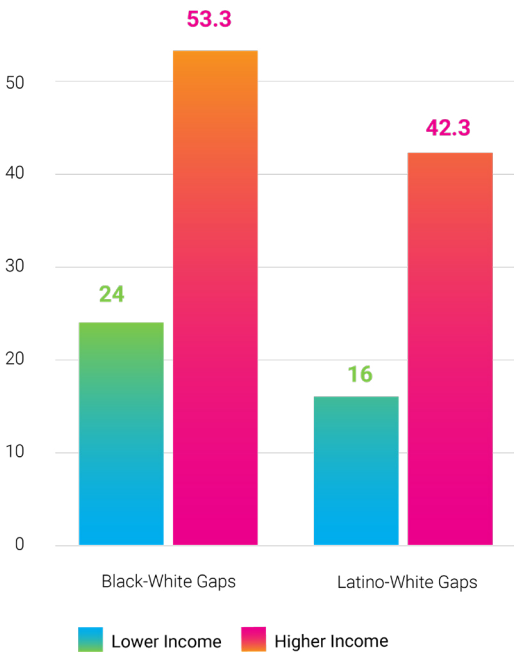
In other words, despite the familiar talking point that poverty is the primary obstacle to educational opportunity, these particular progressive cities actually do a better job of helping low-income black students close the gap with their white counterparts in math than they do with higher-income black students.

The scope of this report does not allow us to say what drives the correlation between progressive cities and underperformance of minority students. We did not consider any policy or practice as a cause for the larger achievement gaps between racial subgroups. But our results demonstrate that there is a negative difference between our most progressive and most conservative cities, and it can't be explained away by factors such as city size, racial demographics, spending, poverty or income inequality. In cities where most of the residents identify as political progressives, educational outcomes for marginalized children lag at a greater rate than other cities.

That finding is stable no matter how we looked at the data. The biggest predictor for larger educational gaps was whether or not the city has a progressive population.

Average Math Gaps of Students in Oakland, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C.

	Black-White Gap		Latino-White Gap	
	Lower Income	**Higher Income**	**Lower Income**	**Higher Income**
San Francisco, CA	35	56	28	44
Washington, D.C.	13	54	1	46
Oakland, CA	24	50	19	37
Average Math Gaps	**24**	**53.3**	**16**	**42.3**



OUR APPROACH

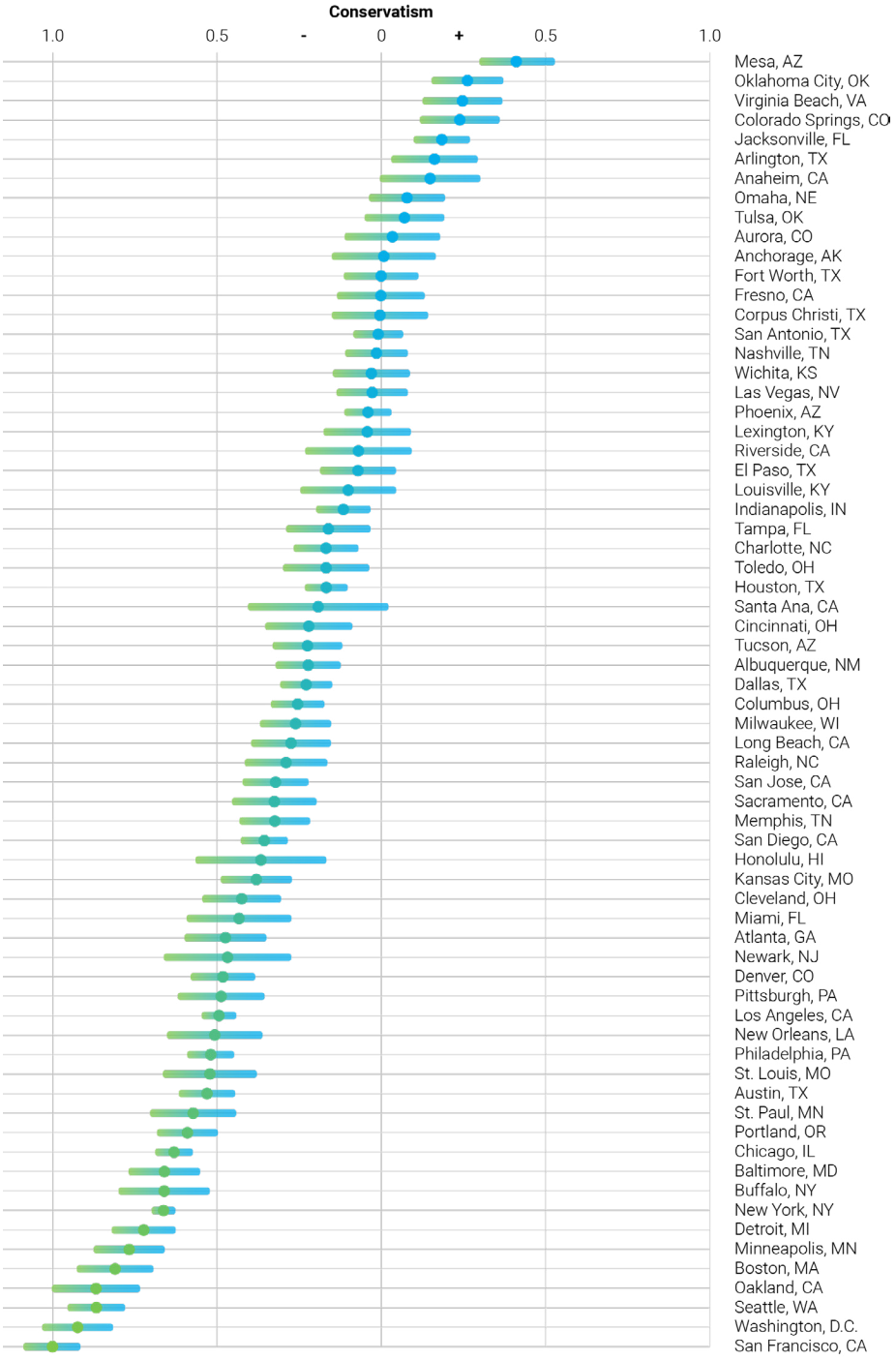
Our research partners compared average gaps in math proficiency, reading proficiency, and high school graduation by race among the public school students in the 12 most progressive cities with gaps across the same measures in the 12 most conservative cities. We examined gaps between black and white students as well as Latino and white students. Proficiency rates, from which we calculated the gaps, come from publicly reported state assessments in the 2017-18 school year for public school districts within each city, typically for grades 3-8 and some high school grades. High school cohort graduation rates are from 2018, or the most recently reported year.

Since states establish their own standards for educational proficiency and high school graduation, comparing those rates across states would likely introduce bias. But every student within a given city, regardless of their race, faces the same academic standards and tests. Standards may be higher or lower in different cities and states, but they are not higher or lower for students of different races within the same city.

In just under half of the cities considered for this report, states and districts do not report charter school performance data as part of district results, so in those cases, we didn't use charter school data for this study. We included charter school data for each city where the state or district combined it with traditional school data: in six progressive cities (San Francisco, Oakland, Detroit, Baltimore, Chicago and Portland) and eight conservative cities (Anchorage, Aurora, Anaheim, Jacksonville, Colorado Springs, Oklahoma City, Tulsa and Virginia Beach).

Cities are identified as progressive or conservative based on criteria developed independently by political scientists **Chris Tausanovitch and Christopher Warshaw**, who pooled data from seven large surveys of U.S. public opinion. These surveys measure the relative political conservatism of cities with more than 250,000 residents. We define "progressivism" as the opposite of the conservatism measure used by Tausanovitch and Warshaw. The authors' estimates of city conservatism are strongly correlated with vote shares in a recent presidential election, suggesting they have reasonably captured a city's ideological standing on the traditional progressive-conservative political ideology spectrum. Their resulting list of the 12 most progressive and the 12 most conservative cities in the U.S. also has face validity, as informed readers will recognize the various cities as clearly belonging in their respective camps.

Progressive and Conservative Cities



Source: Chris Tausanovitch and Christopher Warshaw

DETAILED RESULTS

In Tables 1a-1c, we present the achievement levels and graduation rates overall, then by race, followed by the resulting race gaps, for the public school districts in the 12 most progressive cities in the U.S. Following those tables, we present similar statistics for the 12 most conservative cities (Table 2a-2c). Then we compare the gaps across the cities visually through a series of graphs. Finally, using statistical regressions, we show what the gaps look like after controlling for two crucial factors: The size of each district's K-12 student population and the proportion of that population that is white. As mentioned above, we considered these two factors to be most likely to skew the results toward larger gaps in progressive cities, so we tested them.

Table 1(a). Math Achievement Gaps in 12 Most Progressive Cities

	Math Proficiency Rates				Gaps	
	Overall	Black	Latino	White	Black-White	Latino-White
San Francisco, CA	51	12	21	70	58	49
Washington, D.C.	31	18	31	80	62	49
Seattle, WA	63	29	40	76	47	36
Oakland, CA	27	12	17	63	51	46
Boston, MA	32	20	22	60	40	38
Minneapolis, MN	39	17	25	70	53	45
Detroit, MI	7	6	11	10	4	-1
New York, NY	43	25	30	64	39	34
Buffalo, NY	21	14	13	42	28	29
Baltimore, MD	14	11	16	40	29	24
Chicago, IL	22	12	20	48	36	28
Portland, OR	48	11	24	60	49	36
Average Math Gaps					**41.3**	**34.4**

Table 1(b). Reading Achievement Gaps in 12 Most Progressive Cities

	Reading Proficiency Rates				Gaps	
	Overall	Black	Latino	White	Black-White	Latino-White
San Francisco, CA	55	20	29	78	58	49
Washington, D.C.	35	23	32	83	60	51
Seattle, WA	69	36	49	83	47	34
Oakland, CA	33	19	24	71	52	47
Boston, MA	34	24	26	63	39	37
Minneapolis, MN	42	21	27	74	53	47
Detroit, MI	14	13	19	15	2	-4
New York, NY	47	34	36	67	33	31
Buffalo, NY	23	18	16	40	22	24
Baltimore, MD	18	14	19	44	30	25
Chicago, IL	26	18	26	54	36	28
Portland, OR	61	21	38	74	53	36
Average Reading Gaps					**40.4**	**33.8**

Table 1(c). Graduation Rate Gaps in 12 Most Progressive Cities

	High School Graduation Rates				Graduation Rate Gaps	
	Overall	Black	Latino	White	Black-White	Latino-White
San Francisco, CA	72	52	57	68	16	11
Washington, D.C.	69	68	61	90	22	29
Seattle, WA	82	74	67	88	14	21
Oakland, CA	75	76	68	83	7	15
Boston, MA	75	76	68	81	5	13
Minneapolis, MN	69	62	57	87	25	30
Detroit, MI	77	78	70	72	-6	2
New York, NY	73	69	66	82	13	16
Buffalo, NY	63	60	50	75	15	25
Baltimore, MD	72	73	55	73	0	18
Chicago, IL	84	70	75	82	12	7
Portland, OR	80	71	72	83	12	11
Average Graduation Gaps					**11.3**	**16.5**

The largest black-white achievement proficiency gaps among the 12 most progressive urban school districts are in Washington, D.C., (62 percentage points in math, 60 points in reading) and San Francisco (58 points in both math and reading). Disappointingly, at 49 and 51 percentage points, the nation's capital and the City by the Bay also suffer from the largest Latino-white gaps in learning proficiency. Minneapolis has the highest black-white and Latino-white gaps in high school graduation rates: 25 and 30 percentage points, respectively. The District is close behind Minneapolis with a black-white high school graduation gap of 25 percentage points and a Latino-white gap of 29 points.

The smallest achievement and graduation rate gaps within the 12 most progressive school districts are found in Detroit. The Motor City is unique in many ways that make it an outlier in this study. Detroit has the lowest overall math and reading proficiency rates among the 24 urban school districts in this study. Tragically, only 7% of Detroit public school students are proficient in math and only 14% are proficient in reading. These abysmal learning proficiency rates are similar across all three racial groups in Detroit, generating small racial gaps that, in some cases, like the Latino-white math and reading gaps and the black-white high school graduation gap, actually favor children of color.

While Detroit is an outlier with substantially lower achievement gaps, it is certainly not a model. According to The Detroit News, "Since 2009, Detroit has posted some of the lowest scores ever recorded on the National Assessment for Educational Progress–and not by just a little."[1] Detroit also is anomalous because it has lost over 60% of its population since 1950 and, as recently as 2011, over 15% of K-12 students who lived in the city attended public schools in neighboring districts.[2] None of the other 23 cities we studied came close to that kind of drastic population shift or have posted such low achievement scores. While it was not within the scope of this study to explore the impact of those unique circumstances, we know that other cities did not face the same circumstances and we believe it is likely those factors play a role in Detroit's achievement gap. We also know that population size alone did not account for statistically significant changes in achievement gaps among the 24 cities we studied (see regression analysis on pages 26-27).

Excluding the outlier of Detroit from the sample, the remaining 11 progressive school districts average black-white proficiency gaps of 45 percentage points in math and 44 points in reading, along with a high school graduation rate gap of 13 percentage points. The Latino-white education gaps for the progressive cities, excluding Detroit, are a similarly dismal 38 percentage points in math, 37 points in reading, and 18 points in high school graduation.

The achievement and graduation rate gaps for the conservative districts in our analysis appear in Tables 2a-2c. Virginia Beach, Virginia, has the lowest achievement gaps among the 12 most conservative cities. The black-white gap in math proficiency is only 3 percentage points and the gap in reading proficiency is a miniscule 1 percentage point. The Latino-white proficiency rate gaps in Virginia Beach actually favor Latino students by 2 percentage points in both math and reading.

1 "Editorial: Scary Detroit Scores Make Case for Charters," The Detroit News, November 2, 2019, accessed at **https://www.detroitnews.com/story/opinion/editorials/2019/11/03/editorial-scary-detroit-scores-make-case-charters/4122222002/**

2 Thomas Stewart and Patrick J. Wolf, Understanding School Shoppers in Detroit, Michigan Future Inc., February 2012, accessed at **http://www.uaedreform.org/downloads/2016/01/detroit-school-shoppers-report.pdf**

Several conservative cities stand out for completely eliminating or reversing racial gaps in high school graduation rates. The public school district of Anaheim, California graduates 86% of its high school students in four years. There are no meaningful racial graduation rate gaps in Anaheim. The graduation rate for black students in Anaheim is only 1 percentage point below the rate for white students and the rate for Latino students is identical to the rate for whites. Fort Worth, Texas, similarly has no racial graduation rate gap for Latino students although the high school graduation rate for black students is 5 percentage points lower than the rate for white students. The Oklahoma City public school district only graduates 73% of its high school students in four years but the graduation rate is 10 percentage points higher for black students than for white students and 5 percentage points higher for Latino students than for whites. Virginia Beach, which stands out for its admirably low achievement gaps, graduates high school students at the highest rate in the study, at 93%, but with a black-white gap of 5 percentage points and a Latino-white gap of 2 points.

Table 2(a). Math Achievement Gaps in 12 Most Conservative Cities

	Math Proficiency Rates				Gaps	
	Overall	Black	Latino	White	Black-White	Latino-White
Fort Worth, TX	35	23	36	56	33	20
Anchorage, AK	41	22	32	55	33	23
Aurora, CO	17	14	12	33	19	21
Tulsa, OK	16	16	36	52	36	16
Omaha, NE	30	16	26	48	32	22
Anaheim, CA	25	28	21	40	12	19
Arlington, TX	44	32	39	60	28	21
Jacksonville, FL	56	43	56	70	27	14
Colorado Springs, CO	28	13	18	36	23	18
Virginia Beach, VA	64	62	67	65	3	-2
Oklahoma City, OK	13	16	22	50	34	28
Mesa, AZ	43	25	30	59	34	29
Average Math Gaps					**26.2**	**19.1**

Table 2(b). Reading Achievement Gaps in 12 Most Conservative Cities

	Reading Proficiency Rates				Gaps	
	Overall	Black	Latino	White	Black-White	Latino-White
Fort Worth, TX	35	24	35	63	39	28
Anchorage, AK	46	29	38	62	33	24
Aurora, CO	26	24	20	44	20	24
Tulsa, OK	22	29	43	64	35	21
Omaha, NE	33	20	28	53	33	25
Anaheim, CA	30	35	27	47	12	20
Arlington, TX	42	33	36	61	28	25
Jacksonville, FL	50	35	48	65	30	17
Colorado Springs, CO	37	24	26	46	22	20
Virginia Beach, VA	66	65	68	66	1	-2
Oklahoma City, OK	17	25	33	64	39	31
Mesa, AZ	39	24	26	55	31	29
Average Reading Gaps					**26.9**	**21.8**

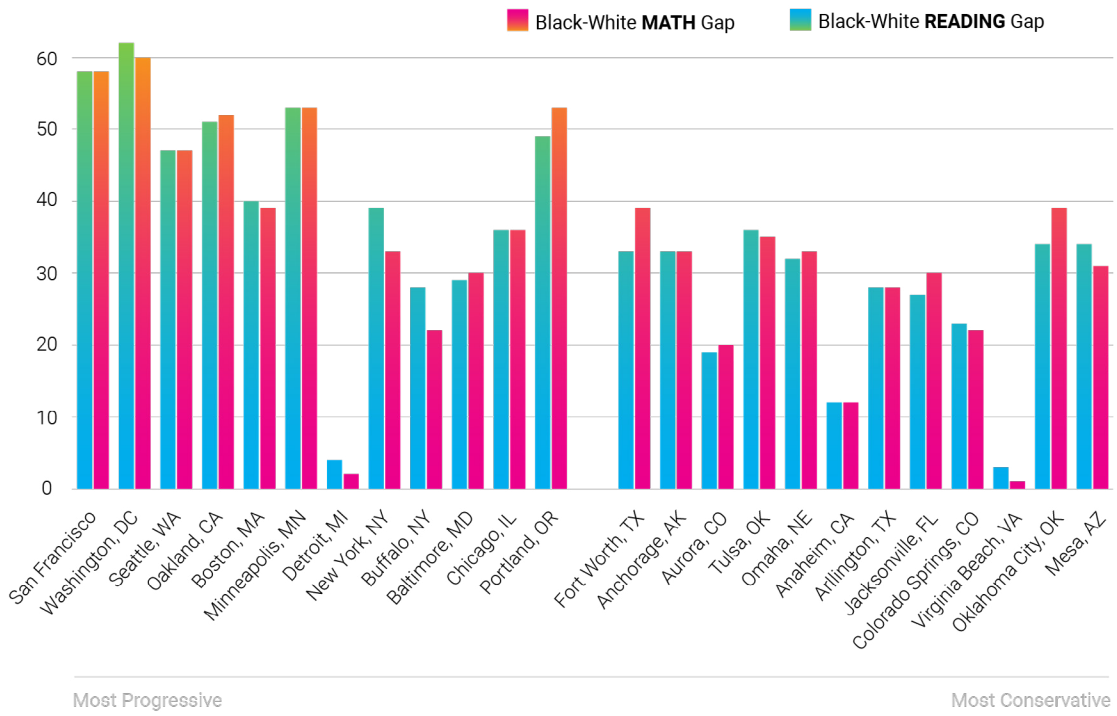
Table 2(c). Graduation Rate Gaps in 12 Most Conservative Cities

	High School Graduation Rates				Gaps	
	Overall	Black	Latino	White	Black-White	Latino-White
Fort Worth, TX	85	81	86	86	5	0
Anchorage, AK	81	74	80	85	11	5
Aurora, CO	65	68	62	72	4	10
Tulsa, OK	78	80	76	82	2	6
Omaha, NE	78	77	74	84	7	10
Anaheim, CA	86	83	84	84	1	0
Arlington, TX	85	83	82	90	7	8
Jacksonville, FL	85	83	84	86	3	2
Colorado Springs, CO	70	67	67	71	4	4
Virginia Beach, VA	93	90	93	95	5	2
Oklahoma City, OK	73	81	76	71	-10	-5
Mesa, AZ	79	71	70	83	12	13
Average Graduation Gaps					**4.3**	**4.6**

Arguably, Virginia Beach is an outlier case among conservative districts in more ways than its admirably low racial education gaps. Military families compose a substantial part of the population of this port city. With many white, black and Latino children hailing from a shared background of having military parents, it could be that Virginia Beach is better situated to eliminate achievement and graduation rate gaps by race than other conservative cities. Excluding the outlier of Virginia Beach from the set of the 12 most conservative cities, the average black-white proficiency rate gap in math for the remaining 11 conservative districts is 28 percentage points, with a reading gap of 29 percentage points and a graduation rate gap of 4 percentage points. The comparable average Latino-white gaps for conservative cities, excluding Virginia Beach, are 21 percentage points in math, 24 points in reading, and 5 points in high school graduation.

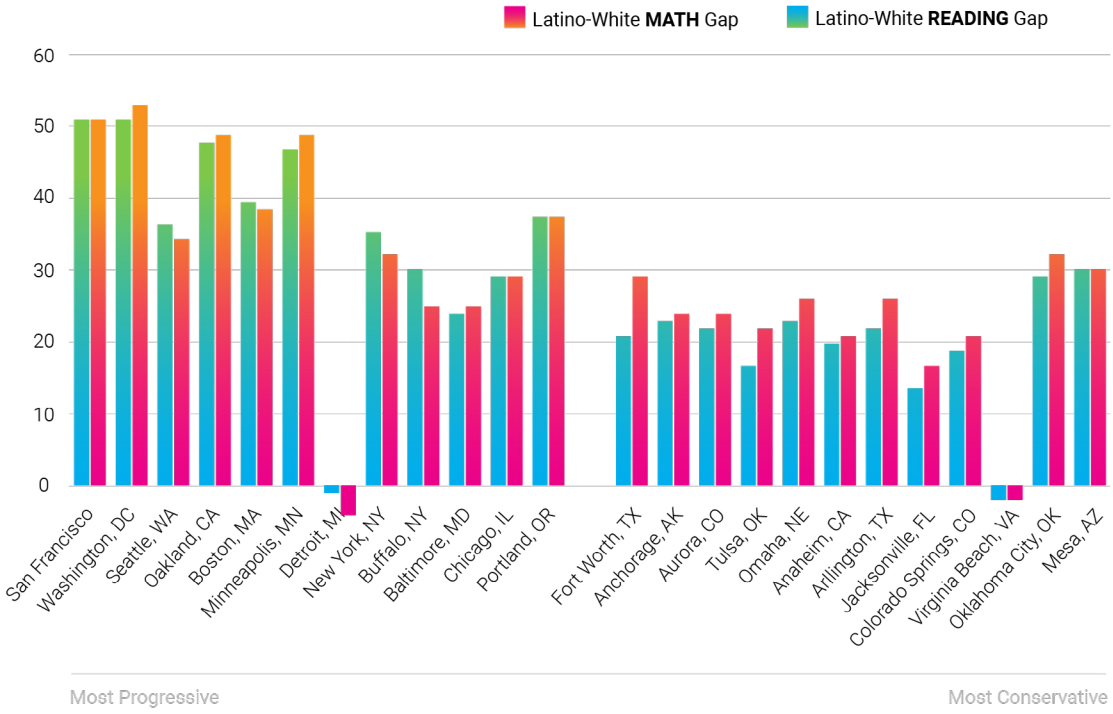
A visual comparison of achievement gaps between white and black students for all 24 cities is available in Figure 1, with progressive districts on the left side of the distribution and conservative districts on the right side. The five cities with the highest black-white proficiency gaps — Washington, D.C., San Francisco, Minneapolis, Oakland and Portland — all are among the most progressive cities. Four of the five cities with the lowest black-white proficiency gaps — Virginia Beach, Anaheim, Aurora and Colorado Springs — are among the most conservative cities. None of the black-white achievement gaps in the conservative cities reach 40 percentage points while 13 black-white gaps in the progressive cities reach or exceed that threshold.

Figure 1. Black-White Achievement Gaps: State Assessments 2018, by City



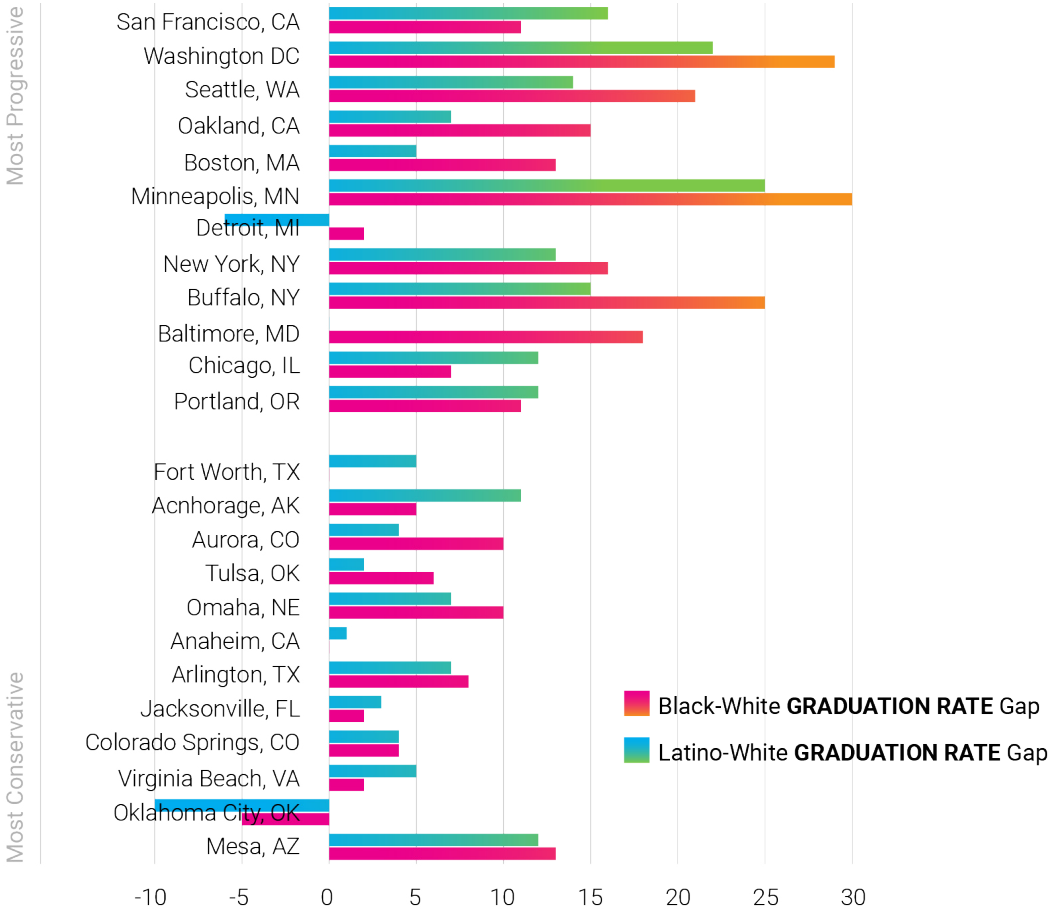
A similar comparison of the achievement gaps between Latino and white students is available in Figure 2. Bar graphs appear negative when Latino students outperform white students. The five cities with the highest Latino-white proficiency gaps — District of Columbia, San Francisco, Oakland, Minneapolis and Boston — are all among the most progressive cities. All five cities with the lowest Latino-white proficiency gaps — Virginia Beach, Jacksonville, Colorado Springs, Tulsa and Anaheim — are among the most conservative cities. None of the Latino-white achievement gaps in the conservative cities reach 30 percentage points while eight Latino-white gaps in the progressive cities reach or exceed that threshold.

Figure 2. Latino-White Achievement Gaps: State Assessments 2018, by City



A comparison of the racial graduation rate gaps is provided in Figure 3, with progressive districts on the top of the distribution and conservative districts on the bottom. The five cities with the highest race-based high school graduation rate gaps — District of Columbia, Minneapolis, Buffalo, Seattle and Baltimore — are all among the most progressive cities. Four of the five cities with the lowest race-based graduation rate gaps — Anaheim, Jacksonville, Colorado Springs and Fort Worth — are among the most conservative cities. None of the race-based graduation rate gaps in the conservative cities reach 15 percentage points while 11 race-based graduation rate gaps in the progressive cities reach or exceed that threshold.

Figure 3. Graduation Rate Gaps, by City



Figures 4 and 5 present comparisons of group average gaps in progressive districts versus conservative districts. Average black-white proficiency gaps are 58% larger in math and 50% larger in reading in the 12 most progressive districts compared to the 12 most conservative districts. Average Latino-white proficiency gaps are 80% larger in math and 55% larger in reading in the progressive districts compared to the conservative districts. Average gaps in high school graduation between white and black students are more than twice as large in the average progressive district compared to the average conservative district. Average gaps in high school graduation between white and Latino students are more than three times as large in the progressive districts compared to the conservative districts. The differences between the much higher average racial gaps in progressive cities and the much lower average racial gaps in conservative cities are almost identical regardless of whether Detroit and Virginia Beach are included in, or excluded from, the calculations.

Figure 4. Average Reading and Math Achievement Gaps, Progressive vs. Conservative Cities

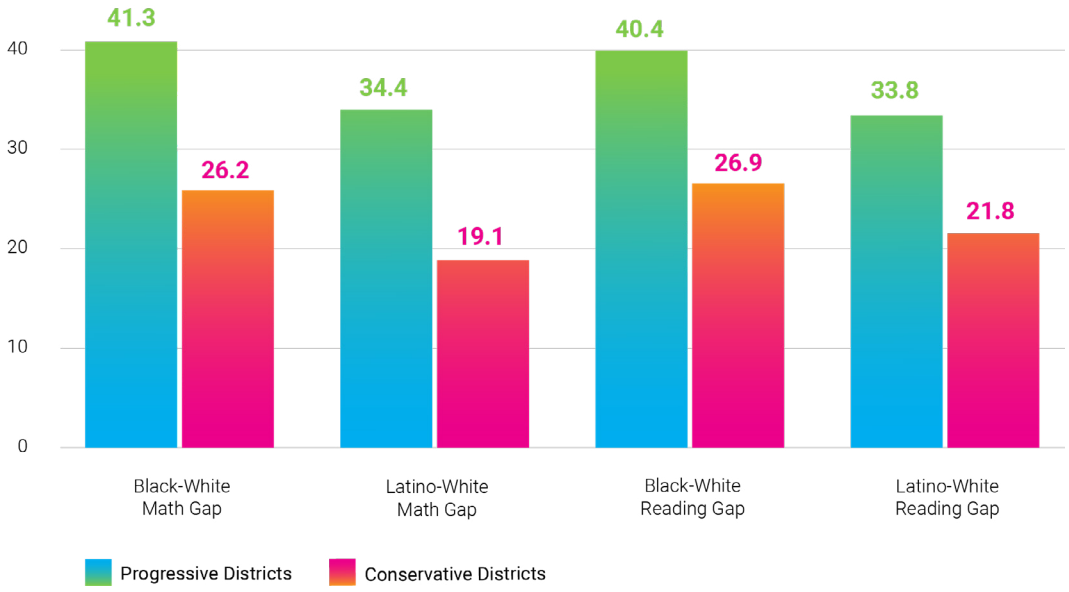
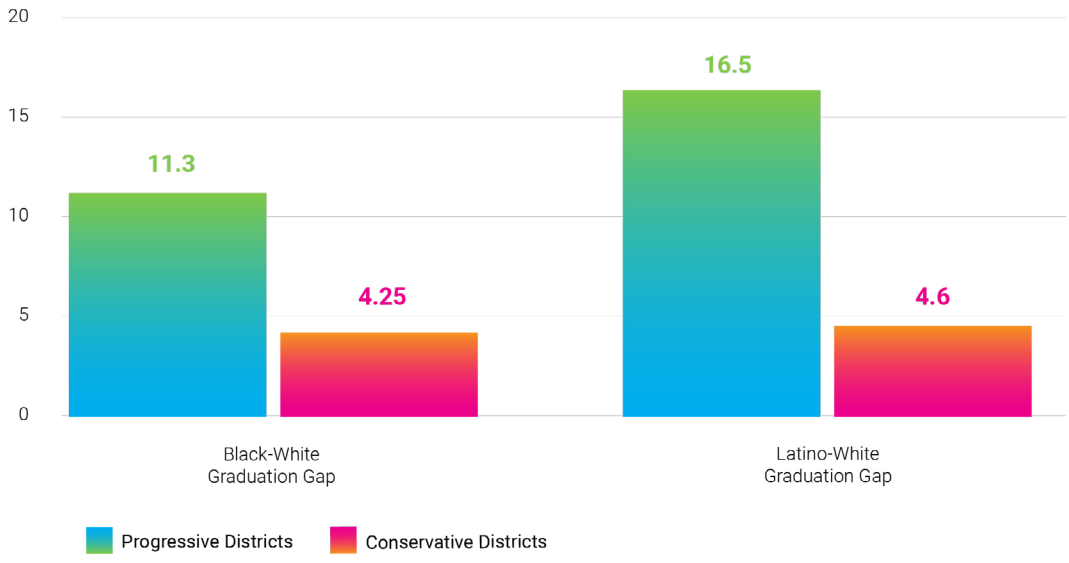


Figure 5. Average High School Graduation Gaps, Progressive vs. Conservative Cities



Public school districts in the 12 most progressive cities tend to have larger achievement and graduation rate gaps than public school districts in the 12 most conservative cities. Are these larger gaps in progressive cities merely due to the racial composition of the progressive districts or the larger size of their student bodies? The Ordinary Least Squares regression output in Table 3 explores these key questions.

Being a progressive city is associated with much higher racial gaps even after controlling for the proportion of students in the district who are white and the size of K-12 enrollment. The progressive cities are associated with a black-white math gap that is 16.7 percentage points larger and a Latino-white math gap that is 16.5 percentage points larger than the conservative cities, controlling for variation in the racial composition and size of the 24 districts. The regression-adjusted black-white and Latino-white reading gaps are 15.1 and 12.9 percentage points higher for progressive cities, respectively. The progressive cities are associated with racial gaps in high school graduation that are 8.4 percentage points higher for white students compared to black students and 13.6 percentage points higher for white students compared to Latino students than the conservative cities.

Other statistics in the regression output shed interesting light on the issue of race-based education gaps in politically progressive cities. The association between being a progressive city and having larger race gaps is statistically significant for all six of the gaps we examine. For three of the six gaps — Latino-white math, black-white graduation and Latino-white graduation — that statistical significance exceeds the high level of 99% confidence. For the other three racial gaps, being a progressive city is associated with higher gaps with a confidence level that exceeds 95%.

Only one other variable demonstrates a statistically significant association with a racial gap in any of the six regressions. A higher proportion of white students in a district is associated with having a higher black-white graduation rate gap. Otherwise, district racial composition and size have no significant associations with differences in the race-based education gaps for the 24 cities in our study. The six regressions explain between 22% and 51% of the total variation in the size of the race gaps in our study, with the indicator variable for being a progressive city accounting for almost all of it.

Table 3. Effect of Being a Progressive City on Racial Education Gaps Controlling for District Percentage of White Students and District Size

VARIABLES	(1) Black/ White Math	(2) Latino/ White Math	(3) Black-White Reading	(4) Latino-white Reading	(5) Black-White Graduation	(6) Latino-White Graduation
Progressive	16.670** (5.916)	16.476*** (5.072)	15.075** (6.445)	12.860** (5.542)	8.425*** (2.907)	13.556*** (3.002)
District % White Students	0.186 (0.183)	0.055 (0.157)	0.171 (0.200)	0.023 (0.172)	0.222** (0.090)	0.126 (0.093)
Student Population 2018	-0.158 (3.578)	-1.720 (3.068)	-0.606 (3.898)	-1.826 (3.352)	0.700 (1.758)	-1.595 (1.816)
Constant	22.571 (39.744)	36.112 (34.072)	28.592 (43.296)	40.915 (37.231)	-9.655 (19.527)	18.238 (20.166)
R-squared	0.296	0.349	0.222	0.216	0.386	0.507

Notes: The percentage of white students and overall student population data are retrieved from state departments of education or the individual school district's website. In the regression analysis, the variable Student Population 2018 is transformed into its natural log.

Figure 6 and Figure 7 present regression-adjusted achievement and graduation rate gaps for the set of progressive cities compared to the set of conservative cities. Controlling for a district's percentage of white students and overall enrollment, the achievement and graduation rate gaps remain larger in progressive districts compared to conservative districts and are very similar to unadjusted differences.

Figure 6. Regression-Adjusted Reading and Math Achievement Gaps, Progressive vs. Conservative Cities

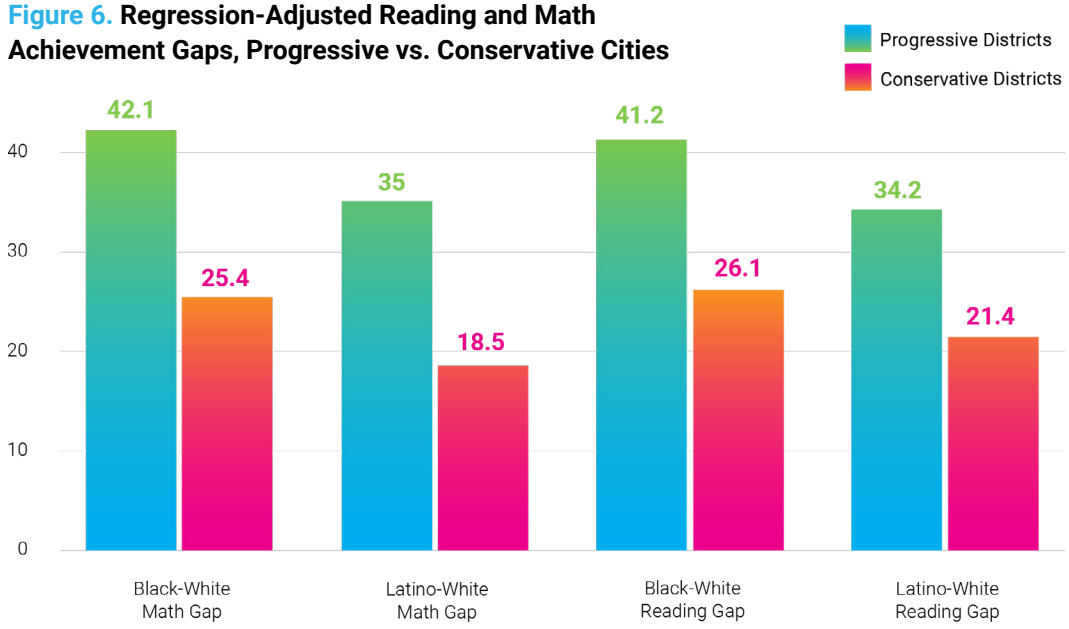
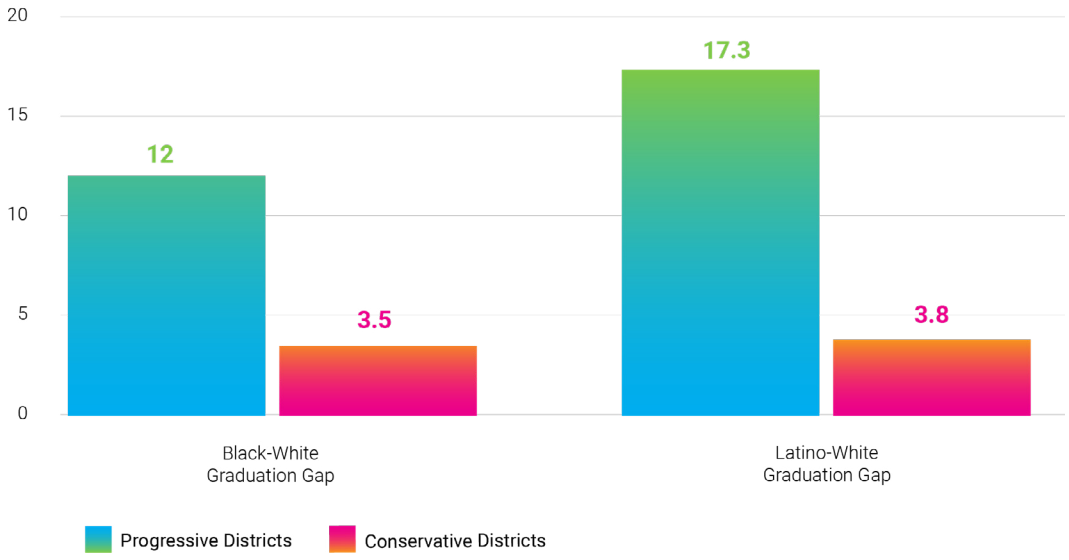


Figure 7. Regression-Adjusted High School Graduation Gaps, Progressive vs. Conservative Cities



Finally, five cities in our study provided disaggregated results by both race and income. The set included three progressive cities mentioned above (San Francisco, District of Columbia and Oakland) and two conservative cities (Anaheim and Virginia Beach). The race gaps in these five cities within income categories were very similar to their race gaps overall. In other words, lower-income white and lower-income black students demonstrated gaps that were about the same as those for higher-income white and higher-income black students. The same was the case for lower- and higher-income whites compared to Latinos within those same income categories.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Progressives, whether elected or appointed leaders, voters, or other concerned community members, must take action so that education in their cities works equally well for every child. It is not enough for cities to tout their booming economies and call themselves cultural centers if entire swaths of children suffer in the shadows. The political class in these cities, those with the power to make change, cannot ignore the fact that racialized gaps in educational achievement are larger in their cities. There is no such thing as a "world class city" where educational opportunity is so poor that many children will never enjoy the good lives their cities are known for.

Leaders in these cities must be accountable for having a well-resourced and publicly monitored plan for improving educational outcomes of children in their care. And engaged residents need to keep these leaders on the hook for making progress in this area.

Fortunately, conscientious leaders will not have to solve educational challenges alone. The lived experiences and counsel from everyday families is a powerful resource that many leaders often tokenize or neglect altogether. It's time for city and education leaders to start looking to the families and communities they serve to address what to do about these gaps.

Because each city has its own unique attributes and assets, we offer the following recommendations as a starting point for change in these cities, or any city that is fed up with an education system that fails to meet the needs of too many children.

For all leaders with stewardship over children, elected, appointed or otherwise:

1. **Call the city together to understand the issues.**

   Convene school and city leaders, teachers and parents to identify where the greatest challenges are, what's been tried in the past, what's never been tried, and why the educational realities of black and brown students are so far removed from the cherished ideals of your city.

2. **Make better plans; set short timelines.**

   If you're trying the same tired initiatives that haven't worked before, you're not serious about helping kids of color. Take a political risk on behalf of the families who need you most. Reach out beyond your typical networks. Bring in well-researched ideas and innovators to make informed bets on what can help students in your city. Work with your communities to develop and commit to a city-wide strategic plan that outlines specific, measurable goals. And set a timeline that will expire before you leave your position. Accountability matters.

3. **Share better information.**

   Information matters to parents and anyone else who cares about results. Most parents in most cities either get misleading information about their child's progress or information that's so complex or out of context that it's rendered useless. Develop a way of making school information more accessible and easy to understand for the communities you serve.

For parents, advocates and everyone else:

1. **Spread the word.**

   Create a sense of urgency in your community. Start conversations with your friends and family on the need to hold leaders accountable and close achievement gaps. Raise awareness of how the failures of the current educational system in your city fails to live up to your own values for meeting the needs of every child. We're producing shareable content at **brightbeamnetwork.org/cities** that you can use.

2. **Demand a plan.**

   Ensure your city's leaders gather community input to create a plan that can be measured against results. Visit **brightbeamnetwork.org/cities** and sign a petition for your city leaders to create a plan to help all children succeed in school, or get involved in any number of our other action opportunities on the site.

3. **Make your voice heard in the halls of power.**

   Reach out on your own to political leaders, from the mayor to the school board. Show up at public meetings about education. Tell them how you feel about the achievement gaps in your city and offer to help. In the end, it's up to each of us to tell our leaders this matters and to hold them accountable to close these gaps.

CONCLUSION

Politically progressive politicians rightly decry the severe gaps in student learning proficiency and graduation rates based on race, but those stirring words have done little to fix the stark disparities that exist between white students and their black and Latino peers. None of us, regardless of our political identities and affiliations, should be satisfied with impassioned rhetoric and token initiatives alone. We need decisive action from leaders and stakeholders.

But particularly in our most progressive cities, where educational attainment is at its most inequitable, we hope that communities and their leaders will see this report as a call to action — an opportunity to lean into their progressive values and work collectively towards an educational system that truly meets the high ideals of opportunity and social responsibility that progressivism represents.

All of us have an outstanding debt to our children. But, to return to the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., America, and most especially these progressive cities, has given our black and brown children a bad check, a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds."

"But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation.

So we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice."

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Lane Wright ensured that the research, analysis, writing, and execution of the report was successfully seen through from start to finish. Maureen Kelleher and Laura Waters provided crucial insights, writing and copy-editing support and more.

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ABOUT BRIGHTBEAM

Brightbeam is a nonprofit network of education activists demanding a better education and a brighter future for every child.

It is the umbrella organization for the flagship platform known as Education Post. Don't worry, **Education Post** is not going anywhere. Today it's one of many digital platforms including **Citizen Education**, **Project Forever Free**, and more than 20 other local and regional sites that spotlight education issues nationally. When Chris Stewart joined as CEO in May of 2019, we had an opportunity to broaden and deepen the impact we sought to make when we first launched Education Post in 2014.

We've been exploring new ways to make a difference in the lives of families and children, and while we've seen the futures of millions of children dimmed by our current education system, there is hope. We've seen what's possible when communities come together around a shared purpose. And across all of brightbeam's platforms and programs we will continue to amplify the voices of those who demand better — so that every child can get an education that leads to a brighter future.

Moving forward, we'll shine a light on communities who challenge decision-makers to provide the learning opportunities all children need to thrive. We'll help our diverse and growing network of voices tell powerful stories designed to unite and move their communities to action.

To learn more please visit **brightbeamnetwork.org/cities**.